

Landau-Zener transitions in qubits controlled by electromagnetic fields

Martijn Wubs¹, Keiji Saito², Sigmund Kohler¹, Yosuke Kayanuma³ and Peter Hänggi¹

¹ Institut für Physik, Universität Augsburg, Universitätsstraße 1, D-86135 Augsburg, Germany

² Department of Physics, Graduate School of Science, University of Tokyo, Bunkyo-Ku, Tokyo 113-0033, Japan

³ Department of Mathematical Science, Graduate School of Engineering, Osaka Prefecture University, Sakai 599-8531, Japan

E-mail: Martijn.Wubs@Physik.Uni-Augsburg.DE

Abstract. We investigate the influence of a dipole interaction with a classical radiation field on a qubit during a continuous change of a control parameter. In particular, we explore the non-adiabatic transitions that occur when the qubit is swept with linear speed through resonances with the time-dependent interaction. Two classical problems come together in this model: the Landau-Zener and the Rabi problem. The probability of Landau-Zener transitions now depends sensitively on the amplitude, the frequency and the phase of the Rabi interaction. The influence of the static phase turns out to be particularly strong, since this parameter controls the time-reversal symmetry of the Hamiltonian. In the limits of large and small frequencies, analytical results obtained within a rotating-wave approximation compare favourably with a numerically exact solution. Some physical realizations of the model are discussed, both in microwave optics and in magnetic systems.

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1. Introduction

An essential ingredient to a quantum computer is a set of parameters that is controllable in the sense that it is possible to manipulate the parameter values at any time such that the qubits undergo one-qubit or two-qubit gate operations. For quantum computer implementations that rely on nuclear magnetic resonance [1] or on spins in quantum dots [2], such a manipulation is possible by switching magnetic fields that act on the qubit. This includes the possibility of inverting the sign of an acting magnetic field. As the field changes sign, the diabatic energy levels of the qubit typically cross. If at the same time a second magnetic field acts in any other direction, the adiabatic levels form an *avoided* crossing instead of an exact crossing. Then, depending on the speed at which the control parameters are manipulated, the state of the qubit can follow the adiabatic energy levels or undergoes a non-adiabatic, so-called Landau-Zener (LZ) transition to the opposite branch [3, 4, 5, 6, 7].

In the context of quantum computation, it has been proposed to exploit LZ transitions for improving the readout of qubits via the so-called Zener flip quantum

tunneling [8]. This mechanism has recently been implemented for flux qubits [9]. A method for non-adiabatic electron manipulation in quantum dots also relies on LZ transitions [10]. Moreover, the observation of LZ transitions is a clear sign of coherence like, e.g., optical coherence in a classical optical ring resonator [11] or macroscopic quantum coherence in superconducting loops [12, 13]. LZ transitions have also been used to determine tiny interactions between levels in molecular clusters [14]. While in these cases, LZ transitions are beneficial, the opposite is true in the case of adiabatic quantum computing [15, 16]. There, the computation is performed by a quantum system that follows adiabatically the instantaneous ground state of a slowly varying Hamiltonian and, consequently, the emergence of any non-adiabatic transition constitutes an error source.

The physical origin of a coupling between two levels of a quantum system is not necessarily simply an overlap between the respective wave functions. In particular for spins and atoms, such a coupling typically stems from the dipole interaction of the system with a radiation field. In a seminal work [17] (see also [18]), Rabi predicted within an exact quantum mechanical treatment that a classical, monochromatic and circularly polarized radiation field induces spin rotations with a frequency which at resonance is proportional to the field amplitude. With resonant linearly polarized light, the same characteristic harmonic Rabi oscillations of atomic inversions are observed. As a consequence of the linearly polarized driving, the optical realization of the Rabi problem is not exactly solvable. For resonant excitations, however, it is possible to apply a rotating-wave approximation (RWA) which formally restores the situation with circular polarization [19, 20]. This necessarily neglects effects beyond RWA like the Bloch-Siegert shift of the resonance frequency. In optical realizations, however, such these effects are very tiny [21, 19].

The question now arises whether a level interaction mediated by a classical monochromatic radiation field can induce Landau-Zener transitions in a two-level system as its energies cross. In this work, we demonstrate that this is indeed the case. Thereby, we investigate LZ transitions that are induced by the coupling of a spin to a linearly polarized light field, henceforth referred to as Rabi coupling. In the traditional LZ problem, non-adiabatic transitions occur when the adiabatic energy levels are close to each other. By contrast, we will find that with a Rabi coupling to a high-frequency field, the transitions take place at times at which the radiation field is at resonance with the diabatic energy levels. This allows for sufficiently weak coupling a perturbative treatment within a rotating-wave approximation. For suitably chosen parameters, the driving reduces the probability for LZ transitions which relates this problem to the so-called coherent destruction of tunneling [22, 23]. A different kind of time-dependence would be provided by coupling the two-level system to a noise source. In this paper, we will work in the coherent limit instead, which at least in possible realizations of quantum computation should be a good approximation on a relevant time scale. In relation to this, it is interesting to note that LZ tunneling is fairly robust against classical noise [6, 25, 26, 27] and quantum dissipation [28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34].

In this context, we like to emphasize that herein considered Landau-Zener tunneling due to coupling to a light field is different from the one considered in Refs. [24, 35, 13] where it is the diabatic energies of the two-level system that are subject to a time-periodic modulation (the so-called dynamic Stark effect). Still, the model considered here applies quite generally to qubits whose level interaction varies harmonically in time due to interaction with an external field that causes a negligible dynamic Stark effect. In the discussion at the end of the paper some possible physical

realizations of the model are suggested.

2. The Landau-Zener model with harmonic interaction modulation

We consider a quantum system (“atom”) with two relevant energy levels $|1\rangle$ and $|2\rangle$ whose time-dependent energies $\pm Vt/2$ cross at $t = 0$. Both levels are coupled to a classical dipole field with frequency Ω and phase ϕ . The effective amplitude g is given by field strength times the dipole moment of the two-level system. Thus, the Hamiltonian reads

$$H(t) = \frac{Vt}{2}\sigma_z + f(t)\sigma_x, \quad f(t) = g \cos(\Omega t + \phi), \quad (1)$$

where $\sigma_z|1\rangle = |1\rangle$ and $\sigma_z|2\rangle = -|2\rangle$. Moreover, we assume that at time $t = -\infty$, the system is in its instantaneous ground state, i.e. $|\psi(-\infty)\rangle = |1\rangle$. If the energies in the first term would be time-independent, and if the field would be in resonance with the atomic energy difference, then this Hamiltonian would describe an atom undergoing Rabi oscillations.

Since for most times, the Hamiltonian (1) is dominated by its first term, a proper interaction-picture representation is provided by the transformation $U_0(t) = \exp(-iVt^2\sigma_z/2\hbar)$, that is $|\psi(t)\rangle = U_0(t)|\tilde{\psi}(t)\rangle$ and $|\tilde{\psi}(t)\rangle = [\tilde{c}_1(t)|1\rangle + \tilde{c}_2(t)|2\rangle]$, where the interaction-picture probability amplitudes obey

$$\begin{pmatrix} \dot{\tilde{c}}_1 \\ \dot{\tilde{c}}_2 \end{pmatrix} = -\frac{i}{\hbar} \begin{pmatrix} 0 & f(t) e^{iVt^2/2\hbar} \\ f(t) e^{-iVt^2/2\hbar} & 0 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} \tilde{c}_1 \\ \tilde{c}_2 \end{pmatrix}. \quad (2)$$

For $\Omega = \phi = 0$, the Hamiltonian (1) defines the standard Landau-Zener problem for which the exact solution of the equation of motion (2) can be expressed in terms of parabolic cylinder functions [3]. Then, the time-evolution from $t = -\infty$ to $t = \infty$ is given by the S-matrix

$$S_g = \begin{pmatrix} \sqrt{q} & \sqrt{1-q} e^{-i\chi} \\ -\sqrt{1-q} e^{i\chi} & \sqrt{q} \end{pmatrix}, \quad (3)$$

where $q = \exp(-2\pi g^2/\hbar V)$ and the Stokes phase $\chi = \pi/4 + \arg \Gamma(1 - i\delta) + \delta(\ln \delta - 1)$, with $\delta = g^2/(\hbar V)$ and $\Gamma(\cdot)$ the Gamma function. The famous Landau-Zener transition probability follows readily: the probability P that the atom ends up in the initially unoccupied level $|2\rangle$ is

$$P \equiv |c_2(t = \infty)|^2 = 1 - e^{-2\pi g^2/\hbar V}. \quad (4)$$

Note that this result is exact for all values of g and V .

Already a good approximation to the time-dependent solution is provided by the fact that for $f(t) = g$ and sufficiently large times, the phase factors in the matrix in Eq. (2) are rapidly oscillating with a quadratic time dependence. As a consequence, \tilde{c}_1 and \tilde{c}_2 remain essentially constant. By contrast, close to $t = 0$ these phase factors assume a stationary value and the two-level system undergoes a transition. This means that S-matrix (3) in fact describes a transition taking place at $t = 0$. Thus, in the interaction picture the dynamics is approximately given by $|\tilde{\psi}(t)\rangle = |\tilde{\psi}(-\infty)\rangle$ for $t < 0$ and $|\tilde{\psi}(t)\rangle = S_g|\tilde{\psi}(\infty)\rangle$ for $t > 0$.

For $\Omega \neq 0$, the time $t = 0$ no longer marks the time at which the phase is stationary and the behaviour changes significantly, as we will see below. In order to anticipate the richness of the resulting dynamics, we have numerically integrated the

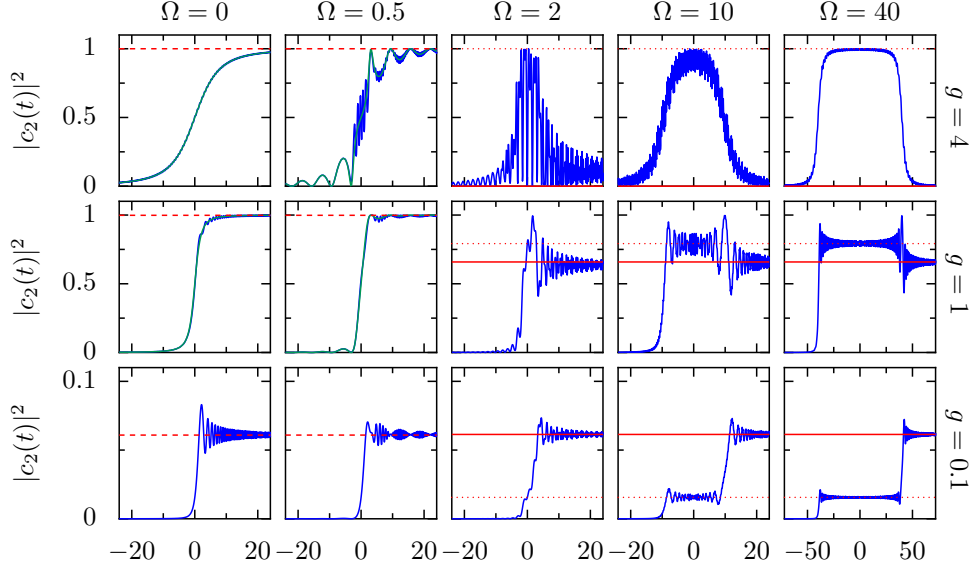


Figure 1. LZ transition probability $|c_2(t)|^2$ as a function of time in units of $(\hbar/V)^{1/2}$ for $\phi = 0$ and various values of the interaction strength g in units $(\hbar V)^{1/2}$ and the modulation frequency Ω in units of $(V/\hbar)^{1/2}$. The red lines mark the standard LZ transition probability [Eq. (4), dashed], the RWA result for a double transition [Eq. (9), solid], and the transition probability at the intermediate stage [Eq. (10), dotted]. The green curves in the four upper-left panels correspond to the adiabatic-following result Eq. (5).

equations of motion (2) for $\phi = 0$ and various coupling strengths g and frequencies Ω . Fig. 1 depicts the time dependence of the probability $|c_2(t)|^2$ to find the atom in the initially unpopulated level $|2\rangle$. For small interaction g (see lower five plots in Fig. 1), the final transition probability for long times does not depend strongly on frequency, although the curves differ strongly around $t = 0$. The most interesting feature of Fig. 1 is that for high frequencies, $\Omega \gg \sqrt{V/\hbar}$, the dynamics consists of two (almost) independent transitions.

3. Adiabatic vs. non-adiabatic transitions

In the standard Landau-Zener problem, one distinguishes two limiting cases: If the level crossing occurs very rapidly, the potential switches practically instantaneously such that no significant dynamics can take place. The system will then remain in level $|1\rangle$ so that finally $P = 0$. In the opposite limit the instantaneous energy levels change very slowly. The system then follows adiabatically the lower-energy level $|E_-(t)\rangle$ and ends up with $P = 1$.

3.1. Adiabatic following

Adiabatic following means that transitions between the instantaneous eigenstates can be neglected. The criterion for adiabatic following is that at each instance of time, the coupling between the adiabatic energies is “sufficiently small”, much smaller than the energy splitting. Stated in mathematical terms, this requirement becomes

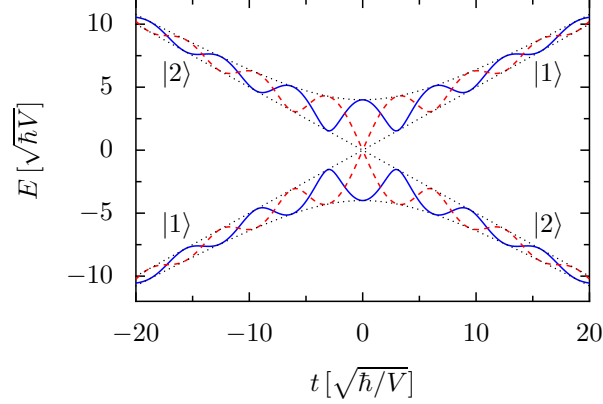


Figure 2. Adiabatic energies $E_{\pm}(t)$ for a Rabi coupling with $\phi = 0$ (solid lines) and $\phi = \pi/2$ (dashed). The dotted lines marked the limiting values for $g = 0$ and the standard LZ model with constant coupling, respectively. The other parameters are $g = 4\sqrt{\hbar V}$, and $\Omega = 0.5\sqrt{V/\hbar}$.

$|\langle E_{-}(t) | \frac{d}{dt} | E_{+}(t) \rangle| \ll |E_{+}(t) - E_{-}(t)|/\hbar$. This gives for the standard Landau-Zener problem a splitting $2g$ and the adiabaticity condition $\hbar V \ll g^2$.

For the time-dependent two-state Hamiltonian (1), the condition for adiabatic following becomes more involved, because the minimal splitting of the adiabatic energies $E_{\pm}(t) = \pm\sqrt{(Vt/2)^2 + f^2(t)}$ depends not only on the coupling strength g but also on the frequency Ω and the phase ϕ . The minimal splitting will never be larger than $2g$, whatever the frequency and phase. The sensitive dependence on the phase becomes obvious from Fig. 2: In particular for $\phi = \pi/2$, the adiabatic spectrum no longer exhibits an avoided crossing but rather an exact crossing, since at time $t = 0$ both terms in the Hamiltonian (1) vanish simultaneously. Consequently, the adiabaticity condition is violated irrespective of the values of the g and Ω . This qualitative difference already provides a hint that the phase ϕ has a strong influence on the population dynamics.

By contrast, for a phase $\phi \neq \pi/2(\text{mod } \pi)$, the energies E_{\pm} never form an exact crossing. Thus, it is always possible to choose V and Ω so small that the adiabaticity condition is fulfilled. Then, by making the time-dependent transformation to the instantaneous-energy representation, neglecting there the off-diagonal elements in the equations of motion, solving the dynamics and then transforming back to the diabatic representation, it follows that the probability $|c_2(t)|^2$ to find the qubit in diabatic state $|2\rangle$ goes from zero to one as

$$|c_{2,\text{adiabatic}}(t)|^2 = \frac{1}{2} \left(1 + \frac{Vt}{\sqrt{(Vt)^2 + 4f^2(t)}} \right). \quad (5)$$

The dependence for intermediate times on the interaction modulation $f(t)$ is clearly seen. The four upper-left panels in Fig. 1 with $\Omega = 0$ or 0.5 and $g = 1$ or 4 are very well described by the adiabatic-following result (5).

3.2. Non-adiabatic regime

For phase $\phi = 0$, the Rabi coupling $f(t)$ is zero at time $t = \pi/2\Omega$ and the energy splitting becomes $\pi V/2\Omega$. This means that for a large driving frequency $\Omega > \sqrt{V/\hbar}$, the adiabaticity condition is violated. The data shown in the right columns of Fig. 1 indicate that in this regime the dynamics consists of two transitions at times $\pm \hbar\Omega/V$. If the time $2\hbar\Omega/V$ between the individual transitions is sufficiently large, as specified below, the two transitions are essentially independent of each other. Then, it is possible to derive within a rotating-wave approximation an analytical expression for the final transition probability. The derivation is closely related to the transfer matrix method employed in Refs. [37, 24].

With the new variables $d_1(t) = \tilde{c}_1 \exp(i\hbar\Omega^2/4V)$ and $d_2(t) = \tilde{c}_2 \exp(-i\hbar\Omega^2/4V)$, one obtains from Eq. (2) the equations of motion

$$\dot{d}_1 = -i\frac{g}{2\hbar} \left[e^{iV(t+\hbar\Omega/V)^2/2\hbar} + e^{iV(t-\hbar\Omega/V)^2/2\hbar} \right] d_2, \quad (6)$$

$$\dot{d}_2 = -i\frac{g}{2\hbar} \left[e^{-iV(t+\hbar\Omega/V)^2/2\hbar} + e^{-iV(t-\hbar\Omega/V)^2/2\hbar} \right] d_1. \quad (7)$$

Like in Eq. (2), the phases on the right-hand side obey a quadratic time dependence. Thus, with the arguments provided after Eq. (3), we can conclude that each phase factor is relevant only at times at which the phase is stationary, i.e., the first term contributes only at time $t_- = -\hbar\Omega/V$ while the second term becomes relevant at time $t_+ = \hbar\Omega/V$. Thus, we keep at both times t_- and t_+ only the respective resonant term while the “counter-rotating” term is neglected. (To be sure, two separate rotating-wave approximations are needed corresponding to t_+ and t_- .) Then, at times close to t_{\mp} , the equation of motion is of the same form as Eq. (2) and the dynamics is determined by the S-matrix (3) with g replaced by $g/2$, i.e. $S_{\mp} = S_{g/2}$. Consequently within the transfer matrix approximation, the time evolution becomes

$$|\tilde{\psi}(t)\rangle = \begin{cases} |\psi(-\infty)\rangle & \text{for } t < -\hbar\Omega/V, \\ S_{g/2}|\psi(-\infty)\rangle & \text{for } -\hbar\Omega/V < t < \hbar\Omega/V, \\ S_{g/2}^2|\psi(-\infty)\rangle & \text{for } t > \hbar\Omega/V. \end{cases} \quad (8)$$

With this expression, the probability to find the system at time $t = \infty$ in state $|2\rangle$ is readily evaluated as

$$P = |\langle 2|S_{g/2}^2|1\rangle|^2 = 4 e^{-\pi g^2/2\hbar V} (1 - e^{-\pi g^2/2\hbar V}). \quad (9)$$

During the intermediate times $-\hbar\Omega/V < t < \hbar\Omega/V$, the occupation probability of level $|2\rangle$ becomes

$$P_{\text{int}} = |\langle 2|S_{g/2}|1\rangle|^2 = 1 - \exp(-\pi g^2/2\hbar V). \quad (10)$$

Note that in these expressions, the exponent differs from the exponent in Eq. (4) by a factor $1/4$. Moreover, P in Eq. (9) no longer depends monotonously on the coupling strength as in the standard LZ problem, but rather assumes a maximum for $\exp(-\pi g^2/2\hbar V) = \frac{1}{2}$. Interestingly enough, the transfer matrix results are independent of the Stokes phase χ and the modulation frequency Ω . The independence of the frequency is confirmed by Fig. 1, where the transfer-matrix results (red lines) nicely agree with the exact results (blue lines) for $\Omega = 2, 10$, and 40 . Clearly, at long times, the probability $|c_2|^2$ is a function of only the coupling strength g .

Below we will compare more systematically the transition probabilities obtained from the transfer matrix method with a numerically exact solution. But first we have

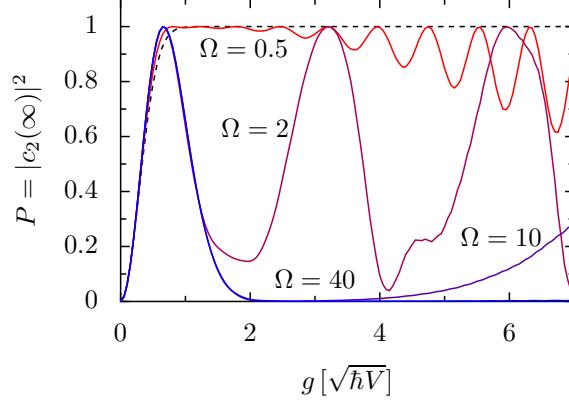


Figure 3. Final transition probability P as a function of coupling g , for several values of the interaction modulation frequency Ω . The dashed line marks the standard LZ transition probability (4) valid for $\Omega = 0$. The transfer matrix result (9) coincides with the numerical result for $\Omega = 40$. (The numerical time integration was performed from times $-500\sqrt{\hbar/V}$ to $+500\sqrt{\hbar/V}$.)

to specify the conditions under which the time between two LZ transitions will be long enough for the transfer-matrix analysis to hold. It should be remembered that LZ transitions neither occur instantaneously nor take infinitely long [38, 39, 40]. The time $2\hbar\Omega/V$ between the two consecutive transitions should be larger than the duration of a single transition. It has been estimated that the standard LZ transition has a typical duration $\tau_{\text{LZ}} \simeq \sqrt{\hbar/V}$ when non-adiabatic transitions are probable ($2g^2/(\hbar V) \ll 1$), while $\tau_{\text{LZ}} \simeq 2g/V$ in the adiabatic limit $2g^2/(\hbar V) \gg 1$ [38]. Correspondingly, reliable results of the transfer matrix approach are to be expected if

$$\Omega \gtrsim \sqrt{V/(4\hbar)} \quad \text{for } g^2/(2\hbar V) \ll 1, \quad (11)$$

$$\Omega \gtrsim g/\hbar \quad \text{for } g^2/(2\hbar V) \gg 1. \quad (12)$$

These estimates are confirmed by the numerical solution of Eq. (2) as plotted in Fig. 3, which depicts the probability of finding the system in state $|2\rangle$ at large times. The figure makes clear that for small coupling strengths $g \ll \sqrt{\hbar V}$ the condition (11) is sufficient but not necessary, because Eq. (9) is seen to be accurate irrespective of the frequency. This is in accordance with the lower five panels in Fig. 1 and with fact that the standard LZ result (4) and the transfer-matrix expression (9) agree that P equals $2\pi g^2/V$ to first order in g^2/V . On the other hand, we find significant deviations from the expression (9) once g becomes larger than $\sqrt{\hbar V}$ and of the order $\hbar\Omega$. This is where the two LZ transitions start to “feel” each other. For sufficiently large coupling, the transition probability even increases again and assumes further maxima with $P = 1$. It is nice that the argument can be turned around and that LZ times can be estimated with the help of the frequencies at which the exact and the transfer-matrix results start to deviate. In doing so, we indeed find (here and in Sec. 4) that $\tau_{\text{LZ}} \simeq 2g/V$ for $2g^2/(\hbar V) \gg 1$, in agreement with [38]. The present model provides an independent and simple method to determine Landau-Zener times.

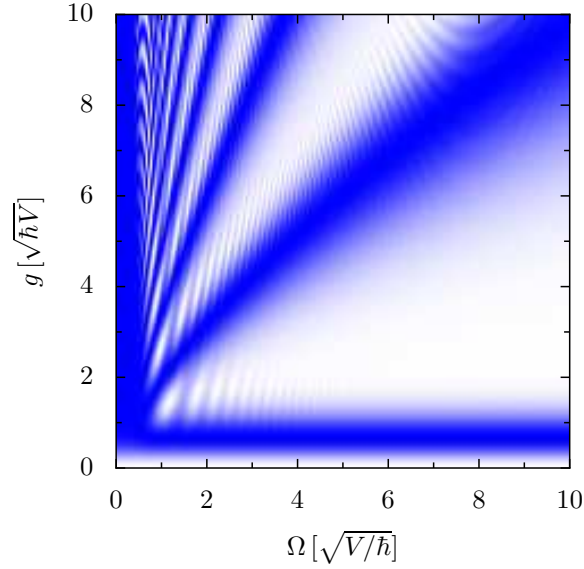


Figure 4. Final transition probability P as a function of coupling strength g and frequency Ω . Blue areas correspond to $P = 1$, white areas to $P = 0$.

4. Exploring the crossover region

Our analysis has identified two different parameter regimes in which the analytical solution is confirmed by our numerical results. First, there is the regime of slow driving in which $\hbar\Omega$ denotes the smallest energy scale of the problem. Then, the time dependence of the coupling is not essential and the transition probabilities are the same as in the standard LZ problem. In the second regime $\hbar\Omega$ is the largest energy scale and the transfer matrix results hold. In particular, we find $P = 1$ for $\pi g^2 = 2\hbar V \ln 2$. In this section, we complement our analytical findings by numerical results for the intermediate parameter regime.

Figure 4 shows the final transition probability, that is the occupation of state $|2\rangle$ in the limit $t \rightarrow \infty$. (The time interval for numerical integration was chosen the same as for Fig. 3.) The vertical stripe with $P = 1$ for $\Omega \lesssim 0.5$ corresponds to the adiabatic regime. The horizontal blue stripe marks the maximum found within the transfer matrix approach. The figure also confirms (i) that the location of the maximum has no significant frequency dependence and (ii) that P decays for a larger coupling g almost to zero, yielding the white region with $P = 0$ above the horizontal blue band, in agreement with the transfer-matrix prediction (9). Increasing g further, we find that at $g \approx \hbar\Omega$, the transition probability again assumes values close to unity. This regime, including the sequence of maxima and minima that can be observed for even larger coupling, is beyond the range of validity of the transfer matrix method. The fact that the transfer matrix approach starts to break down along the diagonal $g = \hbar\Omega$ in Figure 4 neatly agrees with the estimate (12). With the reasoning given in Sec. 3.2, we can infer from Fig. 4 that the estimate for the LZ time $\tau_{LZ} \simeq 2g/V$ [38] holds at least in the broad parameter regime $1 < g^2/\hbar V < 100$.

5. Phase dependence

When discussing the adiabatic energies of the Hamiltonian (1), we have already anticipated that the phase ϕ might have some relevance that we explore in the following. For that purpose, we adapt the analytical approach of Sec. 3.2 accordingly.

5.1. Transfer matrix approach

Inserting again the definitions $d_1 = c_1 \exp(i\hbar\Omega^2/4V)$ and $d_2 = c_2 \exp(i\hbar\Omega^2/4V)$ into the equation of motion (2), we find

$$\dot{d}_1 = -i\frac{g}{2\hbar} \left[e^{iV(t+\hbar\Omega/V)^2/2\hbar+i\phi} + e^{iV(t-\hbar\Omega/V)^2/2\hbar-i\phi} \right] d_2, \quad (13)$$

$$\dot{d}_2 = -i\frac{g}{2\hbar} \left[e^{-iV(t+\hbar\Omega/V)^2/2\hbar-i\phi} + e^{-iV(t-\hbar\Omega/V)^2/2\hbar+i\phi} \right] d_1. \quad (14)$$

These equations differ from Eq. (2) merely by the phase ϕ in the exponents. The goal is now to transform Eqs. (13) and (14) such that they assume at times $t_{\mp} = \mp\hbar\Omega/V$ the same form as Eqs. (6) and (7). After such a transformation the transfer matrix method could be used again. At time t_- , when only the first term in the equations of motion is relevant, an appropriate transformation reads

$$\mathbf{T} = \begin{pmatrix} e^{-i\phi/2} & 0 \\ 0 & e^{i\phi/2} \end{pmatrix}. \quad (15)$$

The corresponding transfer matrix \mathbf{S}_- follows from a transformation of $\mathbf{S}_{g/2}$ with \mathbf{T} and reads $\mathbf{S}_- = \mathbf{T}^{-1}\mathbf{S}_{g/2}\mathbf{T}$. With the same reasoning, we find that at time t_+ the required transformation is \mathbf{T}^{-1} and the transfer matrix is $\mathbf{S}_+ = \mathbf{T}\mathbf{S}_{g/2}\mathbf{T}^{-1}$. Consequently, the complete time evolution becomes $|\tilde{\psi}(\infty)\rangle = \mathbf{S}_+\mathbf{S}_-|\tilde{\psi}(-\infty)\rangle$. This leads to the final transition probability

$$P = 4 e^{-\pi g^2/2V} \left(1 - e^{-2\pi g^2/2V} \right) \cos^2 \phi. \quad (16)$$

Clearly, the phase shift modifies the transition probability by a factor $\cos^2 \phi$. At intermediate times $t \approx 0$, the occupation is determined by \mathbf{S}_- . Interestingly enough, the absolute values of its matrix elements do not depend on ϕ and, thus, we find at $t = 0$ the same phase-independent transition probability P_{int} as in (10). Evidently, the phase dependence in (16) is caused by quantum interference between the two transition paths from $|1\rangle$ to $|2\rangle$, which also explains the absence of any phase dependence after the first transition.

Figure 5 shows a comparison with the numerically computed time evolution. The long-time limits compare favourably with our prediction for the final state. As for the special case $\phi = 0$, the final occupation is independent of the frequency, provided that Ω exceeds g/\hbar and $\sqrt{V/\hbar}$. The strong phase dependence in (16) may come as a surprise, since it is tempting to argue that for high frequencies, phase relations should be immaterial due to the many oscillations occurring during each LZ transition. However, figure 5 clearly demonstrates that such reasoning is incorrect.

5.2. Time-reversal anti-symmetry

The transition probability (16) obviously vanishes for $\phi = \pi/2$. This behaviour can already been obtained from symmetry arguments. For this phase, the Hamiltonian (1) is anti-symmetric under time reversion $t \rightarrow -t$, i.e., $H(t) = -H(-t)$. Then

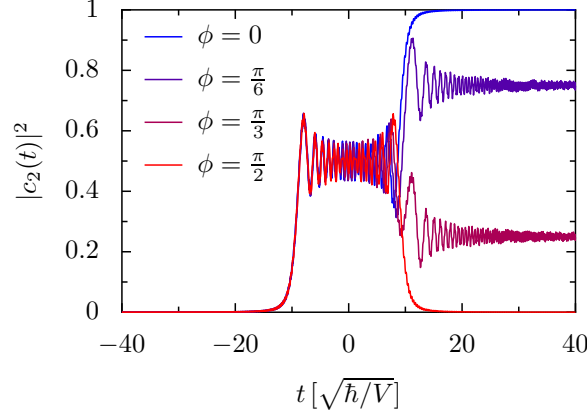


Figure 5. Transition probability as a function of time for $g/\sqrt{\hbar V} = [2 \ln(2)/\pi]^{1/2} \approx 0.664$ and driving frequency $\Omega = 10\sqrt{V/\hbar}$. The transfer matrix method predicts the intermediate population $|c_2(0)|^2 = 0.5$ and the final transition probabilities 1, 0.75, 0.25, and 0, respectively.

the time evolution operators $U(t, 0)$ and $U(-t, 0)$ obey the same equation of motion. Moreover, they obviously are identical and equal to $\mathbf{1}$ at $t = 0$. The equalities $U(\infty, 0) = U(-\infty, 0) = U^\dagger(0, -\infty)$ follow immediately, the last one from unitarity. Consequently, we find

$$U(\infty, -\infty) = U(\infty, 0)U(0, -\infty) = U^\dagger(0, -\infty)U(0, -\infty) = \mathbf{1}, \quad (17)$$

which implies that at long times, the system will evolve back to its initial state.

This ideal back-evolution relates our problem to the Loschmidt echo which has been employed for testing the sensitivity of a “chaotic” quantum system on weak perturbations [41]. In the present case, the small parameter is $\delta\phi = \phi - \pi/2$ which corresponds to the perturbation Hamiltonian $\Sigma = -2g \cos(\Omega t) \sin(\delta\phi) \sigma_x$. Note however, that the present system does not exhibit any sensitive exponential dependence on the perturbation.

6. Discussion and summary

Our study of diabatic level crossing in a system subject to a time-dependent dipole force revealed two intriguing features. First, the probability for non-adiabatic transitions is not simply a monotonous function of the coupling strength but exhibits several maxima and minima. In particular, it vanishes for zero coupling and equals unity if the relation $g/\sqrt{\hbar V} = [2 \ln(2)/\pi]^{1/2} \approx 0.664$ is fulfilled. This is in contrast to the standard Landau-Zener problem where the extreme cases require a vanishing or an infinite interaction strength. Second, we found that the phase ϕ of the dipole field has a significant influence on the transition probability which is proportional to $\cos^2 \phi$. The combination of both effects enables one to steer the system towards the one or the other final state. In turn, it is also possible to use the setup as a diagnostic tool for an unknown phase of a radiation field. The fact that the results of the transfer matrix approach are only valid if the duration τ_{LZ} of a single Landau-Zener transition

is sufficiently small, provides a further application. Measuring the frequency at which the approximation breaks down, allows one to determine τ_{LZ} .

A straightforward physical realization of our set-up is naturally provided by spin- $\frac{1}{2}$ systems in time-dependent magnetic fields. Moreover, one could think of experiments with effective low-spin systems such as molecular complexes [42, 43]. Indeed, the recent resonant-photon absorption experiments on the effectively spin- $\frac{1}{2}$ molecular complex V_{15} could also be performed with a sweep of the magnetic field that is called B_0 . A further possible realization is given by Rydberg atoms in the vicinity of a crossing of the highest Stark level in the n th manifold of the atom and the lowest Stark level of the $n+1$ st manifold [44, 45]. In this case, the energies are swept by the dc Stark effect and the interaction is driven by a harmonically varying microwave field. Then, the strong suppression of non-adiabatic transitions can be tested experimentally. Particularly promising in this respect would be variants of microwave ionization experiments of Rydberg atoms that are based on a mechanism of multiple Landau-Zener transitions to higher and higher Stark manifolds [45].

To summarize, we have studied Landau-Zener transitions in a two-level atom subject to a harmonically time-dependent, Rabi-like interaction. As a main difference to the standard Landau-Zener problem, we find that by tuning the coupling strength within a relatively small range, it is possible to continuously change the transition probability from zero to unity. This behaviour can be explained within a transfer matrix approach, which provides reliable results provided that the driving frequency is sufficiently large. Moreover, this analytical approach allows one to determine the influence of the phase relation between the diabatic energy crossing and the dipole field. It revealed that the transition probability is proportional to $\cos^2 \phi$ and therefore will vanish for $\phi = \pi/2$. The latter result was also shown by analyzing the underlying time-reversal symmetry. The sensitive phase dependence can be exploited both for steering the system towards a particular state and for measuring an a priori unknown phase relation.

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